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Be Explained Instead of Avoided or Mystified

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Rich, Powerful, and Smart

Jewish Overrepresentation Should Be Explained Instead of
Avoided or Mystified

DAVID A. HOLLINGER

IN THE CLOSING SCENE of Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (New York, 2000) two white men, one a Jew and one who might be called a "poor white," confront one another while standing on a sheet of white ice beneath which is an expanse of blackness. The dark water beneath the ice is an obvious symbol for a dead man the reader has learned was born black but had managed to pass as white, although at enormous personal cost. Indeed, his whiteness was like the ice, easily broken in the event of a change in the social weather. The Jew knows that the man born black had died some months earlier in the very waters of the now-ice-covered lake, murdered by the crude, uneducated man he was facing. But he can't prove it. After a few minutes of tense and evasive dialogue the Jew turns and walks away. The Jew, as a well-to-do, highly educated, self-aware person, is able to drive then to New Jersey to engage the black family of the dead man openly and honestly. But the local poor white, who never had much going for him to begin with and lost what humane capabilities he had when the government made him into a killing machine in Vietnam, remains on the white ice of the remote Berkshire lake. The "cracker" is imprisoned by his war-related clinical depression and by the petty prejudices against which his class and culture have given him all too little protection.

This scene, created by a writer whose unyielding preoccupation for more than thirty-five years has been the psychology of Jewishness in the historically specific conditions of late-twentieth-century America, displays features of American life that invite the sustained attention of historians: the success of Jews, and the relevance of a Jewish background to lives lived outside communal Jewry. Neither Roth nor his protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman, is significantly defined by the communal framework that is central to what we normally understand as "Jewish history." Yet

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their personae are deeply marked by a Jewish past. The Jewish experience that animates Roth's entire saga of class and culture, moreover, is not defined by the victimization that has been made all the more central to popular understandings of Jewish history by the Holocaust Museum near the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Rather, the salient Jewish experience is that of relative success, however refracted through neuroses and chaotic family dynamics.

Our national debates on public policy and our social-science literature frequently discuss cases of underrepresentation in employment pools, in academia, in legislatures, in business leadership, and in the ranks generally of the middle class. But do not underrepresentation and overrepresentation form a logical syndrome? Should we not expect the same principles of causation to apply to both sides of the phenomenon? Might what we learn about the overrepresentation of particular descent groups help us to understand the underrepresentation of others, and vice versa? This might seem obvious, but the analysis of overrepresentation, and of the historical processes by which ethno-racial groups that were once underrepresented have become overrepresented, usually stops with the white color line. The Irish, the Italians, the Poles, and the Jews, we say, "became white." But invoking whiteness does not carry us very far. Rural poor whites are not overrepresented at Harvard and in the great brokerage firms. Philip Roth understands the difference very well.

By almost any index, Jews are demographically overrepresented among the wealthiest, the most politically powerful, and the most intellectually accomplished of Americans. Jewish experience since 1945 is the most dramatic single case in all of American history in which a stigmatized descent group that had been systematically discriminated against under the protection of law suddenly became overrepresented many times over in social spaces where its members' progress had been previously inhibited. Jews are not the only descent-defined group to prosper in the United States during the era since World War II, but Jewish success is such an inescapable fact that it invites emphasis and explanation, and in relation to explanations for the social destiny of other descent-defined groups. What explains the overrepresentation of Jews among the rich, the powerful, and the smart?

The failure to pursue this question implicitly fuels largely unexpressed speculations that Jews are, after all, superior—in the sense of being better equipped to cope with the challenges of a complex civilization—genetically to African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians, the groups whose underrepresentation is constantly at issue, and superior genetically also to non-Jewish whites. No sensitive person would say this,

of course, for fear of giving offense. But the quiet suspicion that it may be true is an excellent reason to avoid the topic. I have encountered this sentiment, privately expressed by some scholars in the field, amid conversations about the overrepresentation of Jews among Nobel Prize winners and other leaders in scientific, scholarly, and artistic achievement. “I personally think it is genetic,” one distinguished historian said to me, “but I would never say this in public.”

Such presumptions feed the idea that too much talk about how quickly Jews rise to leadership positions in business, science, the arts, and in some political establishments might make other groups look bad. A sense of decency militates against this—why rub the collective noses of other groups in this reality?—and casts doubt on the wisdom and taste of colleagues who publish statistics on what percentage of billionaires, psychoanalysts, lawyers, left-leaning politicians, distinguished mathematicians, film directors, and chess champions are Jewish. Yet the grounds for this reticence diminish, if not disappear, if these statistics can be explained by taking full account of the conditions under which the various descent communities have been shaped. Avoiding the forthright historical and social-scientific study of the question perpetuates the mystification of Jewish history and subtly fuels the idea that the answer is really biological, and will serve to reinforce invidious distinctions between descent groups.

The Human Stain can be read as an inspiration to confront the ostensibly delicate question of Jewish overrepresentation with robust confidence in the tools of historians and social scientists. Hence I want to linger just a moment longer over what is probably Roth’s most important novel. Roth gives us a black hero who lived his adult life as a highly successful white Jewish academic, but who in his own upbringing in a black community had been blessed with high degrees of social solidarity, cultural cohesion, literacy, and even commercial experience. The particular black family in which Coleman Silk was reared had all those things, and in abundance. Roth details exhaustively the circumstances of Silk’s extended family, and the almost rabbinical-like learning of his father. If it was a light skin that enabled him to pass, it was a set of specific, sustaining conditions that equipped him to make such good use of his acquired whiteness, to perform so well as a classical scholar and as a dean. Roth does not attempt to develop a comprehensive comparative sociology of descent communities and of the terms on which color and color prejudice interact with class and culture, but *The Human Stain* does distinguish sharply between (a) an individual’s membership in a descent community, and (b) an individual’s coming into possession of the generic skills useful

in modern society that have been unequally distributed by history among descent communities, even among those most victimized by European and European American prejudice. Roth urges us to see a black man through the social circumstances that are more common to Jews than to any other American descent community. Roth even endows a black character with the persona most precious to Roth: that of the obsessive, neurotic, Jewish intellectual. "Jewish like me," one might paraphrase John Howard Griffin on Roth/Zuckerman's behalf.

Being "Jewish" can mean, among other things, descent from many generations of people who experienced the conditions of the Jewish Diaspora in Europe. Among those conditions was the high rate of literacy sustained by rabbinic Judaism. But so, too, was the special economic position of Jews as an outsider group. They delivered a range of services about which the Christian and largely agricultural peoples dominant in Russia, the Hapsburg Monarchy, and many other states and empires were ambivalent.

The practice of trades and the handling of money, especially with interest, were essential to development of a modern, capitalist society and sufficiently in tension with traditional value systems to sharpen a division of labor. Jews often performed these vital services, while the non-Jewish majority could remain virtuous producers and honorable military men, and could hold themselves proudly aloof from moneylenders and middlemen. Boundary maintenance in this setting served the interests of both sides: if the outsider peoples mixed too much with the Poles or the Magyars or the Russians, the ability of the "outsiders" to do the "dirty work" diminished. Historians of European Jewry have explained all this to us many times. In order best to survive and prosper, Jews developed to a higher degree than other European descent groups the distinctive set of skills on which the modernization process most depended: calculation, language fluency, recordkeeping, close attention to detail, a facility for abstraction, and the mobility and flexibility required to move around and to deal with a variety of parties who often did not want much to do with each other. These are the very skills that form much of the basis for our modern notion of what it means to be "smart." The old wisecrack, usually offered affectionately, that Yiddish has at least nine words for "jerk" but only one for "tree" is emblematic of the people-centered as opposed to land-centered society and culture of the Central and Eastern European heartland of the Diaspora. The point I am making about the social conditions of many successive generations of Jewish experience in Europe is as simple as it is profound: those conditions endowed Jews with exactly the dispositions that turned out to be the most conducive to leadership in

a host of distinctly modern callings in the North Atlantic West of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Prominent among those callings was science, but so, too, was business. We do have an animated, long-term debate over what Thorstein Veblen, in a classic contribution to the debate, called “The Intellectual Preeminence of Jews in Modern Europe” (*Political Science Quarterly*, 1919). Jewish overrepresentation among Nobel Prize winners and on the faculties of leading universities is explained with reference to a variety of theories, many of them variations on Veblen’s basic idea that the marginality of Jews to a Gentile-dominated society had generated a mentality of detachment and skepticism especially suited to the disinterested pursuit of learning. Veblen and most of his successors in this conversation have attended little to the comparable overrepresentation of Jews in high finance and on lists of the richest of the rich, perhaps because they do not want to retail stereotypes of Jewish bankers. Veblen, after all, was his generation’s greatest scourge of a parasitic leisure class, but the plutocrats and genteel bandits of his most enduring prose in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York, 1899) are never implied to be Jewish. As I have argued elsewhere (*Aleph* 2, 2002), Veblen’s anticommercial bias was so ferocious and his apotheosis of alienation so extravagant that he failed to consider the class position and economic function of Jews in contexts where it might have turned his explanation in a different direction. Inquiries into Jewish scientific and scholarly achievement often run on an independent track, seeking explanations that may or may not apply to other arenas in which Jews have distinguished themselves. But once the demographically disproportionate attainments of Jews in science and scholarship are placed alongside the statistically similar overrepresentation of Jews in the leadership of the professions and in business and finance, intellectual preeminence suddenly invites explanations that also account for these other instances of Jewish preeminence. The skills promoted by the conditions of the European Diaspora as summarized above surely help explain many kinds of Jewish success.

Those conditions also go far toward explaining another case of Jewish overrepresentation: among communists, during and after the Bolshevik Revolution, and in the international communist movement throughout Europe and North America. Three of the four very top Bolsheviks in the Revolution, after all, were Kamenev, Trotsky, and Zinoviev, three Jews who stood with Lenin in 1917. Lenin himself was later found to have a Jewish grandparent, although Stalin suppressed the information. Other Jews among the leading Bolsheviks included Radek, Sokolnikov, Sver-

dlov, and Uritskii. Yagoda, the head of the Soviet secret police under Stalin in the 1930s, was as much a child of the Diaspora as Einstein.

The skills that enabled Jews to take special advantage of the opportunities of a more industrialized, technologically oriented, specialist-intensive society in the United States and in Western and Central Europe also placed Jews at the forefront of the version of modernization undertaken by the Bolsheviks. Distinguished by a higher degree of literacy than any descent group in the Russian empire, including the ethnic Russians, the Jews who migrated to St. Petersburg and Moscow with the dissolution of the Pale of Settlement quickly established themselves in the professions even under the Tsarist regime, and, after the Revolution of 1917, in the state bureaucracy of the Soviet Union. But there was also a vital ideological component. A history of forced and invidious separation made many Jews enthusiastic about the idea of a universalist, socialist state, and Jews were heavily overrepresented among the makers of the Revolution and in the leadership of the new Soviet government. The dynamics of “enlightenment” within East European Jewry—the embracing of Western, secular learning and the storied revolts against the backwardness of the shtetl—interacted not only with the expansion of career opportunities within capitalist modernity, but with the explosion of career opportunities within a more radically modernizing movement and regime that promised to abolish the constraints that had kept Jews from realizing their humanity on the terms that non-Jews had been able to do. Although Stalin eventually turned the Soviet state in anti-Jewish directions, the earliest decades after the Revolution sustained the hope of Jews that communism was the swiftest and surest way to repudiate the tyranny of “blood and soil.” How this course of events unfolded, and the extent of Jewish leadership of the Soviet bureaucracy, is clarified in the book by Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, N.J., 2004).

Fully incorporating the study of the Russian-Soviet case into discussion of the question of Jewish overrepresentation in elites is wise for three closely related reasons. First, it promises to display the power of historical and social-scientific explanations to neutralize prejudicial, mystified, and ethnoracially essentialist ideas about Jews and their role in modern societies. The more we understand how the conditions of the Jewish Diaspora in Europe fostered Jewish participation in the Russian Revolution and the Soviet state, the less credible become suspicions that this participation was caused by something else, such as a peculiarly Jewish will to power. Second, the actual explaining of Jewish overrepresentation among the Bolsheviks, and among their political allies in the United States and other Western countries, promises greater emancipation from

the notorious “booster-bigot trap” according to which the prominence of Jews in one arena or another is reduced to ethnic chauvinism on the one hand or malevolent complaints about Jewish conspiracies on the other. The “good” conversation about Jewish Nobel Prize winners (something to be proud of) and the “bad” conversation about Jewish communists (something the mere mention of which plays into the hands of anti-Semites) can be increasingly replaced by a conversation that recognizes the historically contingent character of all episodes of Jewish overrepresentation. Third, the Russian-Soviet case is a dramatic reminder that some very important history has been made by men and women who (a) were deeply marked by the conditions of the Jewish Diaspora in Europe, but (b) did not identify themselves as Jews. The same point can be made about some men and women in the United States and the countries of Western Europe—there were many who distinguished themselves in one context or another without affirming any affiliation with a Jewish community—but the Russian-Soviet case is enormous and centers on people who actually rejected Jewish identity and invested themselves in the building of a society where Jewishness would be a category with little meaning.

This last point can underscore for us an important issue concerning the scope of the field to which this *Jewish Quarterly Review* issue is addressed, and the location of its borders with adjacent, collegial fields. The role in history played by people who were shaped by the conditions of the Jewish Diaspora is a much broader site for inquiry than the history of communal Jewry. Yet most of what gets classified as “Jewish history” or “Jewish studies,” I hope it is fair to observe, is focused on people who identified themselves as Jews or whose destiny was greatly affected by their being classified as Jews by someone else. Perhaps that is as it should be, or perhaps the borders need to be altered. But scholars have good reason to confront the challenge of dealing with historical actors who were obviously shaped by the conditions of the Jewish Diaspora in Europe yet affiliated only nominally or not at all with any Jewish community and/or were only rarely treated by Gentiles in any special way on account of their Jewish ancestry. The secular men and women of Jewish background who did so much to advance the revolutionary movement in the Russian empire and to staff the Soviet regime in its early decades are perhaps the most vivid examples of this syndrome, but the syndrome applies, also, to many scientists and financiers in the North Atlantic West, and to many of the men and women who led in the development of psychoanalysis, Hollywood, modernist movements in the arts, and other endeavors that have not been defined ethnoreligiously. If such people are

not Jewish enough for their projects and their accomplishments, nefarious or noble, to be included in the mainstream of Jewish history and Jewish studies as focused on communal Jewry, surely there is still something Jewish here to be studied. We all know that Mordecai Kaplan, Abraham Cahan, Stephen Wise, and Irving Howe were figures in American Jewish history, but what about J. Robert Oppenheimer, Robert K. Merton, Thomas S. Kuhn, Walter Lippmann, Julius Rosenberg, Joyce Brothers, Benny Goodman, Ayn Rand, and Madeline Albright?

To be sure, there is a danger of overdetermination: one can try to explain too much with reference to a Jewish background. But that is where statistics are helpful: when descendants of a Diaspora are found to be overrepresented, the greater the overrepresentation the more we should consider explanations grounded in the conditions of the Diaspora. The overrepresentation of Asian-Americans in certain sectors is now being analyzed with reference to the distinctive pre-immigration history and immigration patterns of Americans of Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Bengali, Punjabi, etc., descent. It makes methodological sense to explain cases of overrepresentation with the same analytic tools we use to explain underrepresentation. If the overrepresentation of African American males in prisons can be explained, as it often is by our historians and social scientists, with reference to slavery, Jim Crow, and the larger history of the institutionalized debasement of black people, so, too, can the overrepresentation of Jews in other social spaces be explained by the same principles and methods. Philip Roth, in creating the life of the "black" Coleman Silk in dialectical relation to the experience of Jews and poor whites, understands this as well as we historians do.